

*How to elevate  
the perspective  
of fundraisers  
as leaders*



# LEADERSHIP

## A POSITION OR PROPOSITION?

BY KARLA A. WILLIAMS, M.A., ACFRE

**T**he best fundraisers are leaders in the truest sense. Their leadership does not come from a position of power, however. It comes from a value proposition that their missions matter and merit investment.

### The Concept of Leadership

- **Position:** the place where someone is in relation to other people
- **Proposition:** something that someone intends to do or deal with

The concept of leadership has evolved and matured over time. Today, there is general consensus that iconic leadership is out and participative leadership is in. This means more people will share in the work of leadership: leadership *per se* is no longer the sole purview of the person at the top. In essence, leadership is not just positional; it is propositional. Finally, it is possible to say with some authority that leadership is a behavior, not a title.

Leveling the hierarchical structure of organizational dynamics is beneficial to all nonprofit professionals, but it is especially fortuitous for fundraisers who have struggled

for decades to be leaders when their job description does not say so. Fundraisers have always asked, “How can I be a leader when I am not in a leadership position?”

The good news is, when organizations hire fundraising professionals today, they expect them to act like leaders on behalf of their organizations. Permission given, at least figuratively.

Fundraising professionals do have the opportunity to be leaders in their own right and in their own way. Their leadership *space* is contextually “within,” and their leadership stance is directionally “for” their organizations.

**Within:** Fundraisers lead from within the organization.

- Fundraisers do not lead from the top or the bottom. They lead from the middle, or *within*. The very nature of their work takes them into the nooks and crannies of their organizations as they uncover mission moments, messages and elements so they can construct the “why” for philanthropic support. This internal kind of leadership is almost without space limitations. It forges tactical connections and stimulates strategic discussions with administrative leaders, program experts, frontline staff and clients.

**For:** Fundraisers lead for the organization.

- A fundraiser's job does not stop in the middle or stay within. It extends upward and outward *for* the organization. As leaders, fundraisers take the "why" they uncovered from inside the organization to build out the "how" outside their organizations. By engaging board members, high-level donors, community leaders and a diverse group of supporters, fundraisers inspire others to be advocates and ambassadors for the cause. This external work requires tactical communications and strategic relations, tailored for each and every situation.

In essence, fundraisers lead by navigating a complex landscape, replete with twists and turns, intentionally and artfully creating a community of followers and

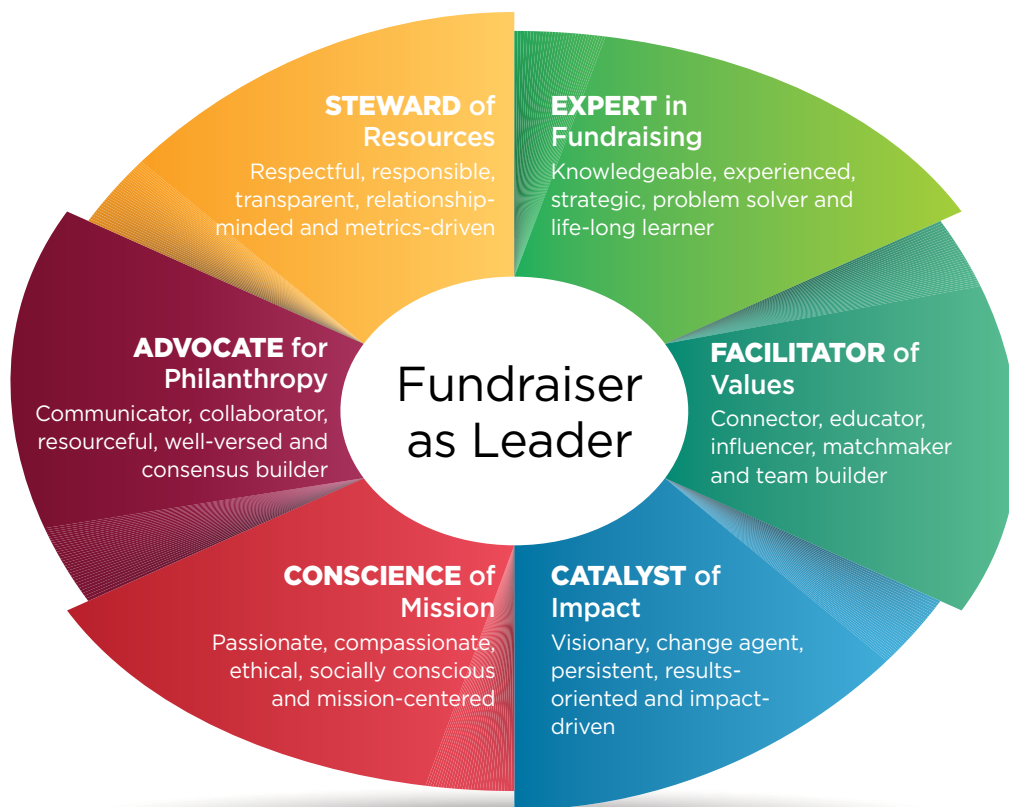
contributors of time, talent and treasure. Some would say that fundraisers have one of the most important "positions" within their organizations because they are the connectors with virtually everyone, everywhere and in every way. I like to think of fundraising as an opportunity to weave the threads in the fabric of what we call community, from within to for.

Looking at fundraising this way, it becomes obvious that fundraising is not really a job or a position. It is an auspicious calling or proposition. Fundraisers lead by inspiring followers for their missions, not themselves.

### Defining the Role of Fundraiser as Leader

Exploring the subject of leadership is really quite daunting. Talking about leadership feels endlessly circular. Thinking about becoming a leader can be rather

## THE SIX LEADERSHIP VALUE PROPOSITIONS FOR FUNDRAISING PROFESSIONALS



intimidating. If you are a fundraiser, however, your role as leader is downright exhilarating and exhausting.

Leadership is dynamic, not didactic. Even leaders in the field have trouble making a definitive list of the desired characteristics of leaders. Thus, it may be easier to wrap your heads around how a fundraiser leader behaves rather than listing characteristics and attributes. They say leaders are ultimately judged by what they do, not by what they say or propose to do. In essence, a leader is measured by what was left behind. However, leadership starts with what someone brings to the table. The best fundraising leaders come with a certain attitude, a set of values, a life perspective and a moral compass that naturally puts them on a leadership journey.

Fundraisers who are leaders have a strong desire to make the world a better place and a deep interest in connecting people with their values. They are big-picture visionaries and mission-focused strategists. They seldom look for a job. They seek a cause. They are devoted to their organizations and go beyond the call of duty to safeguard their missions. Fundraisers who are leaders serve by example, motivate others to action, exercise influence and attract followers to their organizations' missions.

Leaders are those who embrace the dual concept of fundraising: both a calling (ministry) and a career (business). They have inherent abilities to communicate on many levels. They think strategically and tactically.

Research about successful fundraising leaders suggests that they are the ones with an intense desire to make the world better and help others fulfill their philanthropic journeys. Their focus is less on themselves and more on others.

In short, fundraiser leaders seem to exhibit the following behaviors, which are their value propositions:

1. The Expert (in fundraising)
2. The Facilitator (of values)
3. The Catalyst (of impact)
4. The Conscience (of mission)
5. The Advocate (for philanthropy)
6. The Steward (of resources)

What is a value proposition? It is a promise of value to be delivered and acknowledged. A value proposition explains what benefit you provide for whom, how you do it uniquely well and why you are distinctly better than the alternatives. It helps explain why you are a fundraiser who is a leader.

## Be the EXPERT in Fundraising

Fundraisers who are leaders first master their craft. Technical knowledge is their core competency. Not only do they comprehend fundraising theory, principles and techniques, but they also can interpret and align them to fit the type of organization and meet the needs of their

## Fundraiser or Leader?

Many years ago, after accepting a new position, I carefully reviewed my job description to be sure I fully understood my roles and responsibilities. Three pages described my duties, which were primarily to raise money, manage staff and work with board members. On those pages, there were elaborate details about the technical aspects of the fundraising program, but there was not a single reference to "leadership." I found this oddly coincidental, since fundraising was being touted as a bona fide profession. Didn't that mean that fundraisers were more than "management"? After several months, I began to question the logic and legitimacy of my job description. It seemed so technical. It did not reflect the strategic and dynamic organizational elements that gave purpose to those techniques.

I attempted to illustrate those elements. My first draft did not have words or descriptions. It had only a large circular graphic with arrows that showed intersections between internal and external constituents. Later on, I gave my graphic some descriptive terms—Catalyst, Facilitator, Advocate, Conscience and Steward—and then included it in my first book, *Donor Focused Strategies for Annual Giving*.

Although my graphic version never officially replaced the organizational, human resources job description, it served to remind me "why" my job was to be a leader and not merely a technical manager. It was then that I discovered that leadership qualities and technical skills were simply two sides of the same coin. That is when leadership became my proposition—a way of describing how my position influenced a way of thinking, a way of speaking and a way of doing fundraising. It was much better than that three-page job description I was hired for!

**Fundraisers who are leaders** facilitate the philanthropic process. They **connect values with visions, ideals with ideas, aspirations with resources and problems with solutions.**

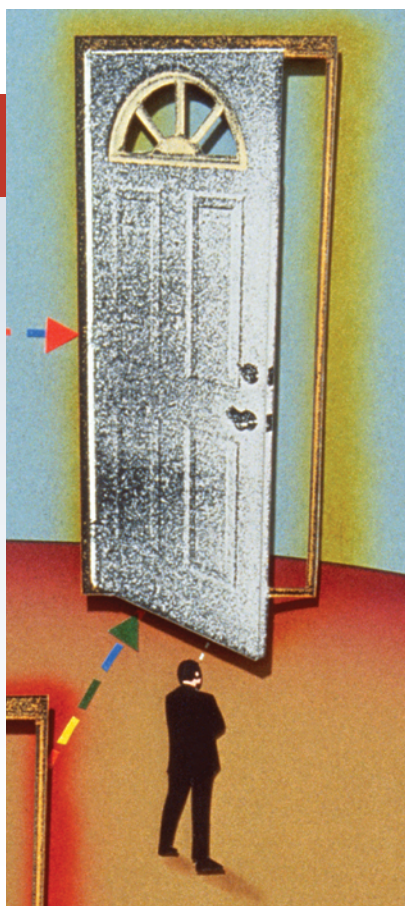
unique constituencies. As experts, their field knowledge and applied wisdom are time-tested, elevating their strategic thinking skills and problem-solving abilities.

As true professionals, they continuously seek new knowledge so they can hone their expertise. They are curious about what is going on from every vantage point. They comprehend the why, what, when and “so what” of donor behavior, case development, research and planning, relationship building and the implementation of an integrated development program. They are well-versed in how and when to use acquisition, renewal and upgrade techniques that result in a sustainable base of support. They also know what does not work and constantly evaluate fundraising performance using the latest technology and metrics.

They are agile and inventive enough to turn on a dime to increase performance or to respond to the latest environmental influences. Their competencies are in line with the Association of Fundraising Professionals’ published standards. They are lifelong learners and participants in their profession. They contribute to the advancement of philanthropy across various sectors and cultures.

### Be the **FACILITATOR** of Values

Fundraisers who are leaders facilitate the philanthropic process. They connect values with visions, ideals with ideas, aspirations with resources and problems with solutions. They facilitate discussions, stimulate dialogue and encourage discovery around purpose and meaning.



## Can You Learn Leadership?

**A**ccording to Lilya Wagner, Ed.D., CFRE, author of *Leading Up: Transformational Leadership for Fundraisers* (Wiley, 2005), professional fundraisers learn the art of leading up by listening, analyzing and influencing. In other words, they are on their own, carving examples of great leadership, seeking opportunities to learn and grow and hoping for that moment in time when someone will notice their inherent qualities.

Frankly, very few nonprofit organizations have a formal leadership development program, which means most fundraisers must take responsibility for their own career development. This is an endemic shortcoming in the nonprofit sector, for which we are paying the price.

For those who aspire to be leaders, in spite of the lack of formal advancement, there is the “over-and-above” rule of professionalism: Go above and beyond to search out new responsibilities, volunteer to head up a project, connect with top leaders, seek input, think big, offer to assist a program director and become widely informed. This will enable you to expand your network while extending your influence.

Of course, there is a last resort: Move up by moving on.



They act as the middle person between dilemmas and dreams. They introduce people to people, and they align similarities with differences.

As leaders, they help organizations adopt philanthropic values and philosophies, build donor-responsive systems and incorporate strategies necessary to attract and retain philanthropic support, now and in the future.

They uphold that philanthropy begins with the donors, who may need to be educated about how to give. They encourage donors to make decisions that fulfill their own aspirations and not to be influenced to contribute to something less meaningful. They are receptive to donors' unique motivations, their giving preferences, their need for recognition and their desire to be involved.

Fundraisers who are leaders value the importance of teaching philanthropy rather than just leaving it to chance. They teach up (to executive directors and board members), down (to volunteers and staff) and across (to program directors and leadership team members). Teamwork, they know, is the basic tenet of a strong fundraising program. They coach and lead others to bring out the best in them.

## Be the CATALYST of Impact

Philanthropic fundraisers articulate the vision of the institution and serve as change agents for social good. They are both courageous and tenacious. They know the difference between outputs and outcomes. Their ultimate goal is to achieve impact, which means something changed and is indeed better.

Fundraisers who are leaders have an acute awareness of the complex external environment of donor motivations, marketing and messaging. They know how to build relationships that are

based on intention, information and inspiration. They help others catch the vision and plan and lead the action because they are results-oriented and have a moral compass.

They have limitless energy in pursuing dreams, inspiring others to action and knowing when to lead and when to follow. They build mutuality while pushing for the highest possible attainment yet understand and resist the obvious risk of becoming self-serving.

## MY BEST HIRE CHECKLIST: FUNDRAISERS AS LEADERS

- ✓ Seem to be natural-born leaders (are poised to lead from the bottom, the middle or the top)
- ✓ Approach fundraising as a marketplace business proposition (are smart and savvy)
- ✓ Are committed to and have an affinity for a specific segment within the nonprofit sector (not just any charitable organization)
- ✓ Have been touched by events in their lives that cause them to want to solve a social problem or advance a cause (are passionate and compassionate)
- ✓ Have an authentic desire to build relationships (are really interested in others)
- ✓ Can influence and inspire others to want to join their causes (are great communicators)
- ✓ Are generous and humble (write their own check first) and do not need to take credit for what they do
- ✓ Are able to measure their own success based on donor satisfaction, not just on how much money they raise (they measure outcomes, not outputs)
- ✓ Utilize metrics and benchmarks to achieve the highest possible goals (they do their homework and strive for excellence)
- ✓ Exhibit stewardship with human and financial resources (are zealous about ethical practices)

## Fundraisers stand at the critical intersection between their organizations and the communities they serve.

As leaders, they are the voices of both their donors and their organization's recipients. This means that they carry messages of concern and praise. They transmit critical questions and give well-informed answers. They understand the complexity of meeting human needs and accept the resultant successes, as well as the disappointments.

### Be the CONSCIENCE of Mission

Fundraisers stand at the critical intersection between their organizations and the communities they serve. This delicate proposition requires balancing the competing

and sometimes conflicting demands and expectations of staff, colleagues, volunteers, trustees and donors. They serve as an organization's charitable conscience.

They are passionate and compassionate. They are socially conscious—demanding that the constituent, the student or the patient comes first, no matter what. They do everything in their power to ensure that their organizations are effective in their reach and for their recipients.

In all they do, the best fundraisers are ethical above reproach. They follow the strictest interpretation of the

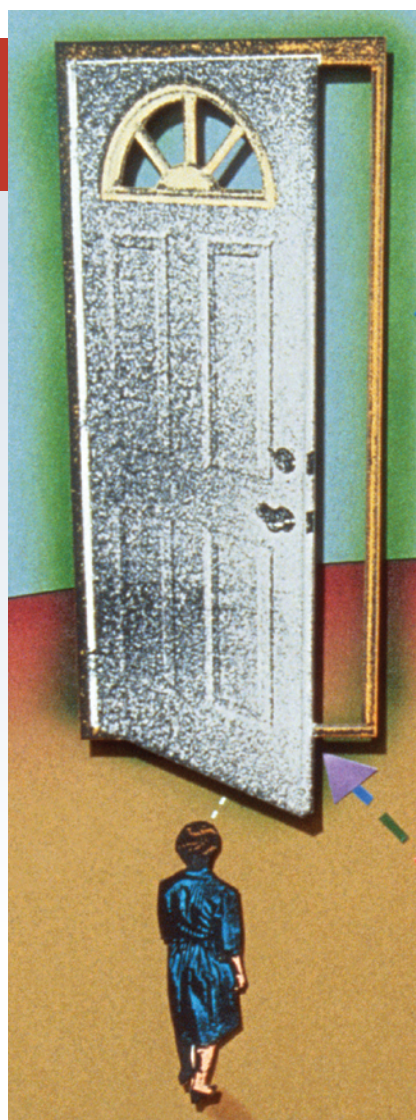
## On “the Leadership Team” or a “Fundraiser”?

The other day, I asked a group of AFP members if they preferred to say they were “fundraisers” or “members of the leadership team.” Most said the latter.

This is not surprising, actually. It seems as though the word “fundraiser” is less than and the word “leader” is more than.

The debate is not new, and it will continue until we as a profession own our words and our actions. And until we in the nonprofit sector earn the public's trust. Like it or not, it is our responsibility as fundraising leaders to defend our titles, our positions, our purposes and our nonprofit sector. We must accept responsibility for the shifts in values, behaviors and terminology that undermine the sector's integrity. As representatives of the philanthropic sector, we fundraisers deserve the severest criticism when we talk about our bottom lines instead of the impact on the people we serve, when we use language like CRMs and LYBUNTS, when we raise money for problems instead of solutions, when we put our institutional needs ahead of our donors' needs or when we become professional technocrats who know more about planning giving instruments than the complexities of philanthropic motivations.

As philanthropic fundraisers, it is our role to help clarify our own issues—to be good and to do good. We must defend all aspects of the philanthropic sector in order to strengthen it. We must espouse its virtues and remedy its shortcomings with energy, courage, intelligence and passion. We may start by asking ourselves whether the title of “fundraiser” serves us well or whether it limits our impact and ability to lead from within and *for* our organizations and our sector—and whether that word advances philanthropy as a way of life.



profession's code of ethics and take no action that would undermine the credibility of their organizations or of philanthropy itself.

They love raising money for their missions. They love to educate and challenge others to raise money for their missions. They love to represent their organizations or the institutions where they work. They get excited about the very concept of sharing an opportunity with a donor to invest in the quality of their communities.

The best fundraisers practice philanthropy in their personal affairs and encourage others to give and to volunteer their time to deserving causes, not just their own.

### Be the **ADVOCATE** for Philanthropy

Philanthropic fundraisers are the voices for their causes in the communities, all rhetoric aside. They know the issues intimately, so they can speak about them without resorting to annual reports, brochures or telephone scripts. Whatever the issue—children, disease, shelter, education, culture, the environment, etc.—they live and breathe it.

As leaders, they are vigilant about helping program staff to articulate their dreams in ways that bring the case to life. While endorsing a program, they help develop the printed business plan or the articulated rationale so that others can invest in ways that benefit the community. They advocate for service excellence because that is what recipients deserve and donors expect. When services are insufficient or lacking, they use their voices to trigger their institutions' conscience.

When they speak, they do so with informed opinions, and the concerns and desires of their donors are balanced by the needs and interests of the recipients. They speak out with patience and understanding, with gentleness and advocacy and with emotion and intelligence.


Fundraisers who are leaders are the voice of the profession as well. They know that their profession is one without competition. It is a vocation of collaboration. They serve as role models and mentors. Through their enthusiasm and commitment, they encourage talented colleagues to enter the profession and provide them with support and guidance. They share their achievements as well as their mishaps. They give away what they have learned, and they continue to grow.

### Be the **STEWARD** of Resources

As frontline recipients of philanthropic gifts, the best fundraisers recognize the responsibility of stewardship. It is their responsibility not only to accept a gift in a

meaningful way but also to regard these funds as their own (figuratively): managing them prudently, investing them wisely and expending them judiciously.

As leaders, they not only take their job very seriously, but they also see it as moral action. Accountability begins when they make a case for support that spells out realistic goals and objectives that make later accountability possible.

As leaders, they know that a philanthropic culture is essential in their organizations because it creates an environment where fundraising is respected and shared. They build relationships that result in the formation of philanthropists (of all financial means) as opposed to getting a big number of short-term donors. Their programs perpetuate the philanthropic tradition and nurture the spirit of giving and receiving. 

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### Additional Reading

*Cultivating Nonprofit Leadership: A (Missed?) Philanthropic Opportunity* by Niki Jagpal and Ryan Schlegel, National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy  
[www.ncrp.org](http://www.ncrp.org)

*Daring to Lead* by Marla Cornelius, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services  
<http://daringtolead.org>

*Donor Focused Strategies for Annual Giving* by Karla A. Williams, M.A., ACFRE (Aspen, 1997), paperback, 304 pages

*Leading the Fundraising Charge: The Role of the Nonprofit Executive* by Karla A. Williams, M.A., ACFRE (Wiley, 2013), hardcover, 262 pages

*Leading Up: Transformational Leadership for Fundraisers* by Lilya Wagner, Ed.D., CFRE (Wiley, 2005), hardcover, 192 pages

*Leading With Intent*, BoardSource  
<http://leadingwithintent.org>

"The Nonprofit Leadership Development Deficit" by Libbie Landles-Cobb, Kirk Cramer and Katie Smith Milway, The Bridgespan Group  
[http://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_nonprofit\\_leadership\\_development\\_deficit](http://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_nonprofit_leadership_development_deficit)